

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Lawrence B. Valk 1838-1924

The Rev. W. M. Patterson, writing in 1875 on the building of churches, signalled the arrival of an architect who, he indicated, might be the harbinger of a new architectural age. Lawrence B. Valk, he said, "proposes a change in [the traditional] form and common arrangements of church-buildings, claiming for what he terms the new form the merits of an intervention."¹

Four years later, the congregation of Old South Church in Hallowell accepted a design by the same Lawrence Valk, including its revolutionary new form, for its new worship place. By the time it was completed six years later, Old South stood as one of the finest and largest modern churches in Maine, an important example of a new kind of church building that would dominate Protestant ecclesiastical architecture in America for the next two generations.

Valk's personal history was as singular as his professional ambitions. Born aboard ship in the harbor of Pensacola, Florida in 1838, Valk spent his youth in New York state.² Early in life, he must have acquired some experience in building or architectural design, for in 1858, at the age of 20, he established his architectural practice. Almost immediately, Valk began to trumpet the creation of a new style of house, which was reviewed in the *Country Gentleman* magazine in 1858. Although its blend of Italianate and Swiss cottage details was somewhat novel, the character of its eclecticism was not unlike that produced by many of his contemporaries, and the cool reception it received from the professional community of the day said as much.³

No doubt rebuffed by the wary response of the architectural press, Valk may have welcomed the chance to join the Union Army during Civil War. Later reports indicate that he served in the Engineer Corps with distinction. In the wake of the war, the nation boomed with new construction, reflecting the rapid growth and industrialization of the nation's cities. All this brought forth a growing number of

ambitious architects. It was in this context that Valk seems to have, by happy accident, been given his golden opportunity to make a name for himself in the architectural profession.

The man who was the catalyst for Valk's opportunity was a famous Presbyterian orator and minister, the Rev. T. Dewitt Talmage, pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn. Talmage's brilliant oratory was attracting huge crowds which overflowed the church's sanctuary. Like many of his contemporaries, Talmage wanted to build a new worship place that would seat large audiences without sacrificing the ability of any one to see and hear the word he preached. He specified the requirements he had for the building:

I want a building to hold 4,000 persons on one floor. The pews must command an equally clear view of the platform: pulpit I want none. They must all form semi-circles converging from that platform and must gradually rise so as to give those far off as good a chance to see and hear as those nearby. Amphitheatrical must be the form. An immense family gathering around the fireplace must be the ideal. Make it that way. Make it as little like a church as possible, so the people not used to sacred edifices will feel welcome.⁴

Because Talmage's notions of appropriate church planning departed radically from the long Gothic nave and aisles used by architects of the day, at first none of the men Talmage approached grasped his idea. But when he talked to young Valk, the revolutionary ideas of the minister and the restless creativity of the architect were in perfect sympathy. The result was one of the largest and best known church buildings of the day. It was first seen and appreciated, however, by Talmage's peers in the clergy community, not by Valk's professional contemporaries; and thus it was the clergy who promoted it as the perfect solution to the needs of the modern preaching church.

Valk soon received commissions to do similar work for other popular preachers, including the Central Congregational Church, also in Brooklyn, for the Rev. H. M. Scudder, the Church of the Disciples in Manhattan for the Rev. George H. Hepworth, and the Ross Street Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn for the



Figure 1. Old South Congregational Church, Hallowell, c. 1890 view
(Courtesy of Gary Elwell, Hallowell).

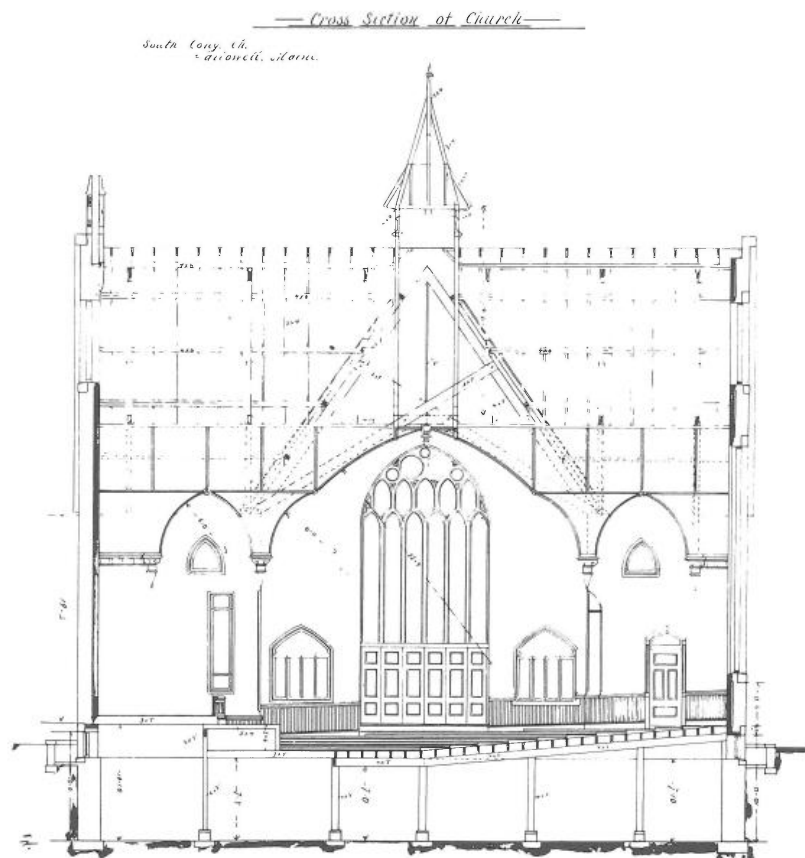


Figure 2. Cross Section of Old South Congregational Church, Hallowell, by Lawrence B. Valk (Courtesy Hubbard Free Library, Hallowell).

Rev. Charles S. Pomeroy. A natural self-promoter and public relations man, Valk soon published a circular of his designs in 1873, modestly titled "The New Form of Plan for Churches."

There he laid out his philosophy of design, which respected the fact that "churches are built for the salvation of souls, not for architectural display to the sacrifice of comfort, of acoustic, lacking in cheerfulness, and the very essentials to make religious worship a matter of pleasure."⁵ For Valk and the preachers he worked for, there was a direct connection between the ease and comfort with which the worshippers heard the word of God, and their receptiveness to its call for salvation. Valk went on to say:

We see around us what may be called dead churches, with no working power in them, simply because the form of the building itself is more at fault than anything else. Some are dark, dismal and gloomy, some over-loaded with ornament and stained glass, some on the old cathedral plan, cross shaped, with naves and aisles, high peak roofs supported by columns obstructing the view of chancel or platform, and the main essential, the comfort of the audience, entirely lost sight of.⁶

Valk proposed, instead, a wide, open plan for the auditorium, with a sloping floor and seating arrangement that resembled theater plans of the day. The

curving rows or arcs of seats were divided by radiating aisles which all led to the central pulpit platform. No columns obstructed the view, and the acoustics were excellent, enabling each worshipper to see and hear the preacher without difficulty.

Although Valk claimed that his design was an invention, a "new form of plan," in actuality he was one of several architects in the 19th century to use the auditorium or theater plan for a worship place. As early as 1836, the Broadway Tabernacle (Congregational) was built using the plan at the behest of Charles Grandison Finney, the great revivalist preacher. And Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, built in 1849, included the full complement of curving pews, radiating aisles, and curving balcony. In the late 1860s, at the same time that Valk was working with New York preachers to plan their new churches, Gordon Randall was designing auditorium plan churches in Chicago.⁷

Thus, Valk's work was not really an invention at all. However, his promulgation of the plan, his work for some of the best known preachers of the day, and his application of its features to a broad spectrum of Protestant church buildings—large and small alike—were instrumental in popularizing the plan through-

out America beginning in the 1870s. Valk's work in developing a popular prototype proved highly significant because this worship arrangement ultimately became the standard plan for most Protestant church buildings constructed through the 1910s.

It is in this context, then, that Old South Church assumes its full importance. After a great fire had destroyed its meeting house during Advent in 1878, and very aware of its pedigree (the cupola of the previous building had been designed by Charles Bulfinch in 1806), the congregation understandably turned to the increasingly well-known New York architect for its replacement. Significantly, Valk had also established a close relationship with the Congregational denomination in America, encouraging many individual congregations to retain the architect for their new buildings. Letters, drawings, and other materials survive which document the development of the design and construction of the building and tell a fascinating story of how it came to be.

Under the leadership of a young minister, the Rev. Charles A. White, the congregation met soon after the fire to decide how and when to rebuild. Records show that the congregation early decided to build with Hallowell granite, giving the city a major monument made of the native stone already prized around the nation. Once Valk was selected, he supplied a design which clothed the compact form with traditional exterior details which worked to disguise the novel arrangement within, as was the custom of other architects who used the auditorium plan (Figure 1). The corner tower with attached turret, gabled side walls, and large traceried windows were all expressed in the English Gothic style which was favored for Protestant churches of the day. That style also related well to the new Gothic library located just down the street.

The design was remarkably similar to another that was proposed by Valk for a Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, which he publicized to promote his work in the 1870's. Both buildings are similarly proportioned, composed with corner towers with high spires and attached polygonal turrets, and gabled side walls with single, large arched windows. The Philadelphia design, never built, was probably a competition entry for First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, won by Philadelphia architect James H. Windrim and still standing today. As one of the most substantial and imposing of Valk's design suggestions, it is possible that the congregation in Hallowell asked him to build a variation of it for their use.

From the start, however, the church experienced difficulty in raising funds to pay for the construction. Reluctant to go into debt over the building, it asked Valk to revise his plans to reduce building costs, and the commencement of construction was delayed for

two years. Finally, in 1881, a contract was let to the Kennebec Granite Co. in Hallowell to quarry the granite. Further delays were experienced when the church decided to purchase a lot adjoining the old meeting house site to allow the large new building to sit back from the street. This, in retrospect, was one of the most fortunate decisions made by the church. It gave the building, already very imposing, a high position on a knoll one block up from the main commercial street, making it the most prominent building in town, a position it retains today.⁸

Labor problems in the granite industry combined with construction delays prompted a legal battle between the church and the granite company over the ownership of stone quarried to that date. After settlement, due to depleted funds, construction was suspended yet again, with only the foundation completed. After further delays, and under the guiding hands of the Rev. Edward Chase, the newly hired minister, the cornerstone was laid on May 21, 1883, fully four and a half years after the meeting house had burned.

The work progressed rapidly, and the townspeople pledged an additional \$1,400 to purchase a city clock to place in the tower's belfry. Made by E. Howard & Co. of Boston, the face was painted black with gilded hands and numerals, and was owned and maintained by the city until given to the church in 1962. A bell cast by the McShane Bell Foundry of Baltimore was hung in 1885, incorporating bronze salvaged from the old meeting house's bell. After one last work stoppage due to limited funds, additional monies were pledged which allowed the church to be finished in October, 1885.⁹

The church was much admired when it was finally opened to the public. The windows were glazed with ornamental, strongly colored cathedral glass. The walls were plastered, as was the ceiling, the vaulted appearance of which belied the wood truss roof above (Figure 2). The tracker organ was by Hook and Hastings, and the woodwork was finished to imitate red mahogany. The pews, of ash, were curved, creating the half circles promulgated by Valk, all of which faced a central pulpit platform bordered by a pierced wood platform rail (Figures 3 & 4). The pews were handsomely finished with the knobby flamboyance of the Roccoco Revival popular at the time. To the north of the sanctuary, behind another gabled exterior wall, were the furnished vestry room and Ladies' Parlor, separated by panels of ground glass.

Today the building stands largely intact, with such minor alterations as the removal of the pulpit platform rail, the addition of panelled partitions to either side of the chancel and a tall pulpit behind the communion table, and the electrification of the original



Figure 3. Auditorium, Old South Congregational Church, Hallowell, 1986 view (Courtesy of Author).

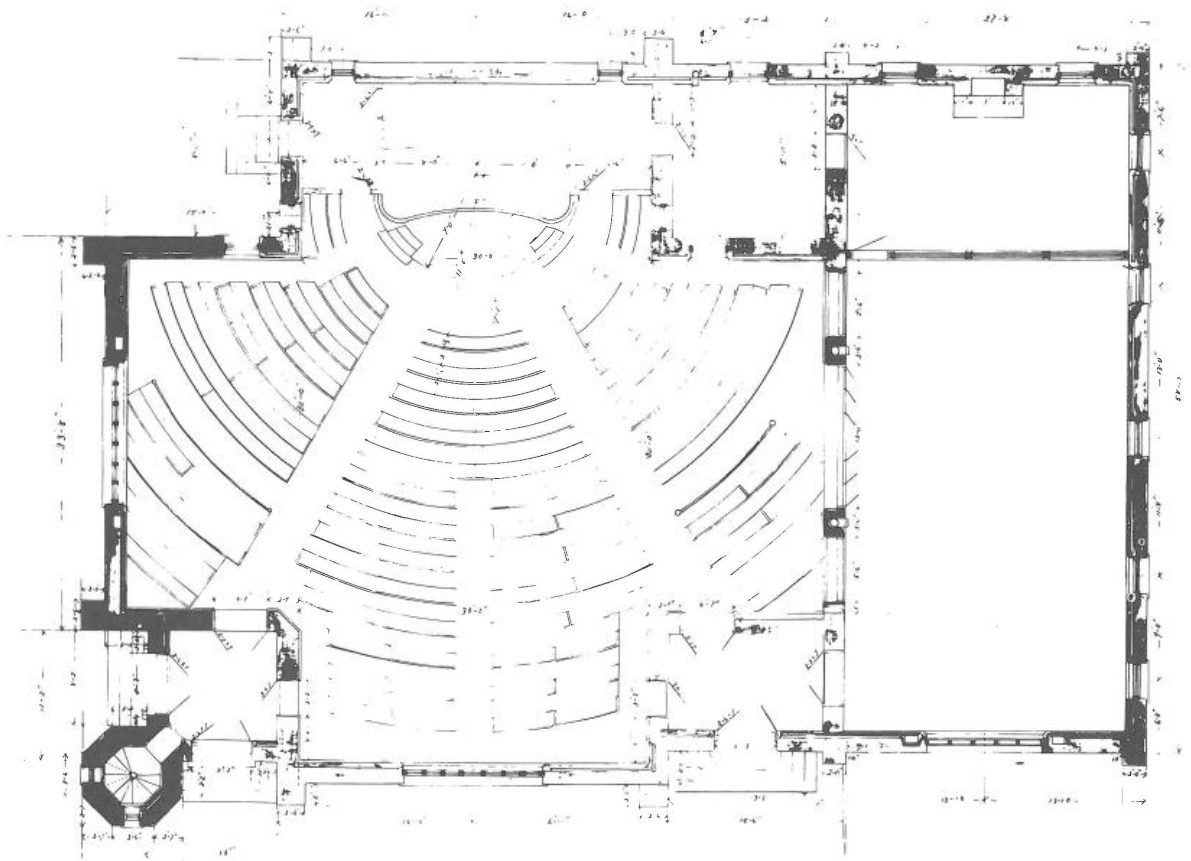


Figure 4. Floor Plan of Old South Congregational Church, Hallowell, by Lawrence B. Valk (Courtesy Hubbard Free Library, Hallowell).

gas reflector chandeliers.

During the 1880s, Valk continued to specialize in church design, and examples of his work could be found in Baltimore, Philadelphia, upstate New York, and especially New York City. Moreover, nine of his designs were widely known throughout the national Congregational Church after they were published in its denominational yearbook. The greatest concentration of surviving examples is in Manhattan and Brooklyn, where Valk first established his reputation, including the Chapel of St. Michael's and St. Mark's Episcopal Church (1885), the City Temple (Seventh Day Adventist) (1881), Sixth Avenue Baptist Church (1880-81), and the Institutional Church of God in Christ, (1885).

The great building boom that began in Southern California in the late 19th century may have attracted Valk's restless spirit, for he moved to the Los Angeles area, probably in the late 1880s. There he again specialized in the design of church buildings and was responsible for many major commissions in the Far West, including the First Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington; Central Avenue Congregational Church in Los Angeles; and First Congregational Church in Pasadena. He continued to practice until shortly before his death at the age of 86 in 1924. His obituary noted that he was "the oldest active member of the Southern California Architects' Association, and was highly revered and respected by the members of that organization."¹⁰

The Old South Church in Hallowell survives today as one of the most prominent and characteristic products of Valk's remarkable and prolific career. It stands as a monument in local stone to a personality and a design that has national importance. Ultimately, it is an enduring landmark to a significant chapter in American church architecture and religious history, one which gathered every resource to give prominence and influence to the minister of God and the Word he preached.

A. Robert Jaeger

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NOTES

- ¹ William M. Patterson, *A Manual of Architecture: For Churches, Parsonages, and School-houses, Containing Designs, Elevations, Plans, Specifications, Form of Contract, Rules for Estimating Cost of Building, with Suggestions on Acoustics, Ventilation, Heating, Lighting, Painting, etc.*, New York, 1875.
- ² "Aged Church Architect Passes," *Pasadena Star-News*, January 2, 1924, p. 1.
- ³ "The 'New American Style' of Architecture," *Country Gentleman*, November 4, 1858. A view of this "style" was later published in September, 1859.
- ⁴ Henry Isham Hazleton, *The Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, Counties of Nassau and Suffolk*, New York, 1925, p. 1331.
- ⁵ Lawrence B. Valk, *Church Architecture: General Description of Some of the Most Prominent Buildings Recently Erected in Iron, Brick and Stone, Together With Full Explanation of the New Form of Plan for Churches*, New York, 1873, p. 3.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ A. Robert Jaeger, *The Auditorium and Akron Plans—Reflections of a Half Century of American Protestantism*, Master's Degree Thesis, Cornell University, 1984, pp. 69-72.
- ⁸ Lois Ware Thurston, *Hallowell's Granite Church: Old South Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, of Hallowell*, unpublished manuscript, pp. 1-4.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-9.
- ¹⁰ "Aged Church Architect Passes," *Pasadena Star-News*, January 2, 1924, p. 1.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY LAWRENCE B. VALK

Old South Congregational Church, Hallowell, 1878-1885, Extant.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

The Hubbard Free Library, Hallowell, has a set of plans, elevations, and sections on linen of Valk's drawings for Old South Congregational Church.

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